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I

IN A CITY SQUARE

YOU enter Bolt Square by a grim little archway; there is no way in but under the arch.

Within is well-like and cool—a colourless, cheerless spot oppressed with a sense of remoteness and strangely quiet, being so closely muffled from all noise of the surrounding streets. The railed-in garden that once brightened at the heart of it has long since been levelled down and buried under a barren surface of asphalte, and one side of the square itself has been swept away and replaced by the backs of modern buildings, whose doorways open on an adjacent thoroughfare.

But even these newer houses now

have lost their look of newness; the older houses proper to the square are weather-worn and crazy; and the silence of the place is as the silence of a sleep that is haunted by dream-life and rumours of yesterday.

Punctually at nine in the mornings a grey old clerk arrives in a certain small upper room at the rear of one of the newer buildings, methodically exchanges his decent frock-coat for a shabby office jacket, and seats himself at a littered writing table. He has arrived in that same room at that same hour week in and week out, Sundays excepted, every day for over a quarter of a century. He is a lawyer's copying-clerk, and his whole existence has been a monotonous round of subserviences, self-repressions, uninteresting routine; and, self-distrustful and unambitious as he is, he drinks the tasteless water of his life in mechanical contentment.

Whether he drinks it from earthen vessels of winter or from golden stoups of summer, it is never anything but water now; yet he can still remember sometimes how, long ago, one dazzling morning when the spirit of spring breathed a new soul into the world, there came on him also a sudden change, and the water of his life blushed to wine.

The miracle happened in this wise: bending that morning, as usual, over his writing, he was suddenly thrilled by an ethereal singing, every note of which wavered, a wonderful bubble of sound, down into the dead stillness of the square and burst, filling it with thin echoes.

He caught his breath and, glancing in bewilderment at the houses opposite, saw the singer, a fair young girl, reaching from an attic casement to hang a bird-cage on a nail.

The sun was flashing in the upper windows on the other side of the square,

and she, arriving thus in the full blaze of it, affected him rather as some unsubstantial, happy spirit living like an impossible mote in the sunbeams, and having no visible entity apart from them.

She drew back, and presently leaned out again, swaying a small red watering-can and scattering a diamond rain over a row of flower-pots ranged along the parapet of the roof. And still she sang, and the bird sang with her; and he could only sit staring and listening, enchanted, till she finally disappeared.

The window yawned, but she was not there.

He blinked and looked again, scarcely crediting his own senses. Certainly this had never happened before, and he could hardly believe it would ever happen again. Yet, dream-like as it was become, it had evidently been no dream, for the row of flower-pots continued to bristle

along the ledge, and the bird was piping rapturously.

Thereafter, he found it hard that day to concentrate himself on his work. As often as the bird fell silent a blank sensation of the unreality of what he had seen and heard returned upon him, so that he was impelled to check his pen and look out again to convince himself he had not been deluded by a hitherto dormant imagination.

The afternoon wore away, and gradually, as if a grey, phantom water had risen and filled it, the well of the square darkened, the sunshine, which had drifted round and floated higher up the walls, flowed off across the housetops and was gone.

And throwing a last glance at the row of flower-pots and the bird-cage, before he went home, it seemed to the solitary clerk as if they had been there a very long time, they were already so familiar,

and as if the haunting voice and sweet girlish face were fading memories of some far-off happier year.

Night touched the whole episode with fresh uncertainties, and, in a manner, removed it immeasurably farther from him. In the light of another morning, indeed, it had waned in every detail, as those elusive nothings will that are native to the cloudy world of sleep. Wherefore, when he re-entered his office, and her voice and the mellow singing of the bird were the first sounds that greeted him, he could almost have doubted whether he was yet awake. But his window framed her in a clear perspective; she was there beyond all doubt, leaning into the sunshine, as he had seen her yesterday, shaking a glittering shower from the small red water-can.

It came to pass, after this, that he would look out for her expectantly, and was conscious of a fretful disappointment

when on dull or rainy mornings she failed to appear.

His window being on the shady side of the square, and he sitting well back in the shadow of his room, she could scarcely have seen him even had she looked straight towards him; and far from desiring to intrude on her notice, he shrank from it nervously, much as of old a strayed peasant, chancing on a fairy bowered in a bluebell, would cower out of sight, fearful that if his nearness were known she might vanish at once and for ever.

Summer being spent, and autumn near its end, there gloomed a memorable morning when not only did she fail to appear, but the bird-cage and the flower-pots were withdrawn as completely as though they had never been there.

Then, day after day, the nail and the ledge remained unoccupied; she seemed to have vanished utterly with the last

burst of sunshine; and throughout the slow, bleak winter, he caught no glimpse of her at the casement, and was never sure whether he sometimes heard her singing within the closed attic or whether he tricked himself with fancies.

Rains drizzled into the square, and made its asphalte shiny and slippery; hail rattled dismally on its blurred windows; white snowflakes fluttered down into it silently, like ghosts of dead leaves blown in from country places lying desolate beyond the city.

Then the spring and she returned together.

One morning the cage hung in the sun, the flower-pots were back on the ledge, and the enchanted clerk was aware that she was singing as if there had been no winter anywhere except in his own thoughts. The heart in his breast throbbed, like the bird in its cage, to the sound of her voice, and he could

hardly see her face for the sunny mist that blinded him.

He had accounted for her advent, in prosaic moods, by assuming she was the daughter of some new housekeeper at the house opposite. Why he had missed her so, why his heart had ached for her returning, or why it meant so much to him, he had not asked himself. He knew, though he dare not own that he knew, even to himself; for she was young, and he had been old from his youth; she was fair beyond words, and he plain and poor and ungainly. Nevertheless, there were rare evenings when he wandered palpitating under the grim archway into the square, and loitered shyly to watch her doorway, but she never came out or passed in whilst he was there.

Had his courage been greater, had he been less morbidly conscious that his loiterings were conspicuous and liable to

attract attention, he might have lingered persistently some evening till she came; if only his door, as well as hers, had opened into the square, they could scarcely have avoided an occasional meeting, and who knows how different the end might have been? As it was, she came and went by her door in the square, he by his door in an outer thoroughfare, and they never met.

Two years of such blissful unrest for him and recurring disappointment—then, with the going of an autumn, the flowers and the bird-cage went as before from their places, and the next spring neither they nor she came back.

Morning after morning the lonely clerk looked out for her, saddening as the hours and the days passed, and still she did not come. He cheated himself with specious reasons for her delaying, and would not give up hope until spring merged into summer, summer faded, and

the first snowfall whitened the square; then he ceased for a little to expect her, but was comforted with vague speculations on the possibilities of next spring.

But another spring failed to bring her; and another; and she came no more.

He could not easily reconcile himself to his loss. Hope withered in him slowly, very slowly, but was dead at last. By degrees he drifted back to the settled, monotonous dullness of his earlier days, his whole outlook became as colourless as it had been ere her coming; and now, here in due season, he is grey and old indeed.

Howbeit, even yet, there are golden mornings of the spring when he will start strangely and, with a hand hollowed behind his ear, turn his dim eyes wistfully towards the bare ledge opposite, as

if she needs must come again with the sunlight, and it is her face that he sees there at the casement, her voice that he hears singing in the shining dawn of the year.

II

THE EARLY TRAM

"INSIDE, mister," says the conductor. "Mustn't stand out here."

It is the five o'clock tram in the morning, full inside and out; so we walk inside and stand.

Other surplus passengers jump on and enter, until every inch of standing room within is occupied. All on the roof are artizans and labourers going to work; and we are all working-men of one sort or another inside—with two exceptions. One of these exceptions is a depressed woman in black, who carries a big bundle of tailoring work in her lap, and is falling asleep over it; the other

is a gentleman of conspicuous elegance, who is standing and getting crumpled in the middle of a row of nine of us.

He wears an immaculate top hat and frock coat; a thick gold chain is festooned across his waistcoat; he is gloved, and looks the more genteel because the rest of us male passengers are common men wearing cloth caps or seedy bowlers, and our garments are splashed with mortar or otherwise worse for wear.

Some of us are furnished with dinners in red handkerchiefs, and cold tea in tin cans. Those of us who have seats are mostly finishing our morning's nap; a large, obese carpenter, nursing a bag of tools, indulges in asthmatical coughings, but nobody is disposed to talk. Nobody utters a word till the conductor suddenly flutters his hand in the doorway and ejaculates:

"Dahn!"

"Dahn!" echo sleepy voices all about the car.

We, who are standing, duck instantly and crouch between the knees of the seated passengers—all except the top-hatted gentleman who regards our proceedings with blankest astonishment.

"Dahn!" the obese carpenter wheezes at him, with an imperative downward motion of his thumb.

"D'yer 'ear?" cries a flushed toiler on the other side. "Dahn, can't yer!"

"Dahn!" the car adjures him, indignantly.

Impatient hands reach out to pluck at him, and, humiliated and bewildered, he ducks, causing a momentary unpleasantness by eclipsing with the tails of his frock coat the man squatting immediately behind him.

"What—what is this for?" he demands pathetically.

"Cops!" the obese carpenter informs him.

"I beg your pardon?"

"Peelers!" another interprets. "Two at the corner on point duty."

"There they are!" murmurs the carpenter, morbidly enjoying the situation.

Glancing up, we see him and the other seated passengers watching the unsuspecting policemen out of the tails of their eyes, while the conductor lolls in the doorway as unconcernedly as if he had nothing on his conscience.

"But why do we do—er—this?" insists the gentleman, indicating the abased attitude of himself and the eight others.

"If them peelers see you an' these chaps standin' up," says the carpenter, with forensic sagacity, "they'd 'ave yer all up for overcrowdin'. An' the conductor, too, for lettin' yer do it."

"They'd summons yer," the flushed

toiler chimes in, expansively; "an' that'd mean——"

"Right-o!" the conductor announces.

We stand up stiffly, and, peering round each other, enjoy a glimpse of two policemen dwindling into the perspective.

"It'd mean," adds the obese carpenter, "fines all rahnd."

The flushed toiler doubts this; if you asked him, it would mean "seven days without no option"; that's his opinion. A grimy little man, crushed and suffocating in the corner next the door, endorses this view, and a pimply passenger, whose slumbers have been disturbed, growls tetchily.

"If the peelers cops yer," he declares recklessly, "its six months' 'ard fer workin' men, an' toffs is 'ung for it—so they bloomin'-well orter be!"

He is interrupted by the conductor's abrupt

"Dahn!"

"Dahn!" echoes the car.

Eight of us promptly obey.

But the gentleman hesitates.

"Dahn!" the obese carpenter mercilessly insists.

"Dahn!" the car choruses, menacingly.

And down he has to go.

"If you came by this car every mornin' like us," the flushed toiler remonstrates, "you'd know what you got to do without no fuss."

"E'd like some of yer to be chucked art an' 'ave to wait 'arf a hower for the nex', an' lose a hower's pay," snarls the pimply passenger. "Wouldn't care if yer lost yer jobs through it, 'e wouldn't!"

"They ought to run more cars," the gentleman retorts, with as much loftiness as a man sitting on his heels can compass. "I am due to meet a friend arriving at Millwall at six, or I certainly would have kept out of this tram. Why

should I have to put up with—er——It —it's shameful!"

The pimply passenger coughs behind his hand with an absurd affectation of extreme delicacy.

"You should ha' bespoke a special, sir," the obese carpenter says, sympathetically, "wiv six 'orses."

"Right!" the conductor calls to us.

But we are scarcely up when his face reilluminates the door-way, and he shouts frantically, under his breath,

"Dahn!"

An unexpected policeman has appeared wandering on the near horizon.

"Dahn!" the car echoes, mechanically.

This time we all duck as by clockwork; the gentleman, in a fever of indignation, glaring and muttering wildly down the neck of the man in front of him.

"If the wheel o' me brougham 'adn't come orf larst night," the grimy little

man in the corner pipes, insinuatingly, "I wouldn't 'ave to ride to the City with nasty, low blokes like you lot 'ere!"

"Brougham's all right, Tommy," the obese carpenter returns darkly; "it's me coachman—laid up wiv 'oopin' corf, 'e is, an' I can't drive meself, else 'ow could I sit inside?"

"I'll get the missis to bring me in the pram another mornin'," sighs the pimply passenger. "Creases yer trowsis, it do, stoopin' dahn so much."

"Right—o!" from the conductor.

"Stop!" cries the gentleman, rising, desperate, but still dignified. "I—I will get out here—I will walk."

"Mind the step, sir," pleads the grimy little man, peering round the doorway after him with a kindly solicitude. "Take yer time, an' walk gently. Don't run, else you'll make yerself 'ot!"

III

A THAMES WHARF

THERE is nothing picturesque about the place; it is not sanctified as some of its smaller, dirtier neighbours are, by a glamour of old associations; the years have scarcely yet even begun to humanize its insensate walls with the mellowing touches of their dingy fingers. It is, in fact, a quite modern building of grey stone, high and broad, and altogether unadorned. The towering rear of it stares out grimly over the Thames from many windows, and on each floor are two broad doorways overhung by iron cranes.

Certainly, it is as sordid, commonplace looking a wharf as any along the

waterside, a hard-and-fast matter-of-fact business structure in every feature of it. Not the less does it stand, as one may say, in the suburbs of fairyland, having intimate dealings every day with the wondrous isles and far-off regions of romance.

Up the winding, long river, from seawards, from crowded docks where the home-come vessel sleeps at anchor, a fleet of barges will trail sluggishly in with the tide, nearer and nearer, under the shadow of the bridge, into the shadow of the wharf, carrying heavy cargoes of spices, dried fruits, and such-like merchandise sent over from outlandish places at the other end of the world: bulging sacks that have come upon the backs of camels across sandy, sun-scorched deserts, down to some quaint, Eastern sea-port, boxes stamped with names of cities we have read about in the pages of the "Arabian Nights." The tide being at

flood, the river rises well up above the ground level of the building. One of the two lowest doors opens inwards, a hinged flap falls outwards, and a man with his shirt-sleeves rolled up to his elbows steps forward on it, and deftly flings a rope to one of the barges. The other end of the rope being fastened to a ponderous iron ring in the wall, the barge is soon hauled and poled in below the doorway. A second barge is similarly secured under the other doorway alongside. There is a deal of hoarse shouting between the bargees and the men on the wharf; presently two of the higher doorways open, their flaps fall out with a hoarse jar, cranes swing forward, chains rattle down over their wheels, and for the next half-hour or more full sacks and boxes go floating up from the barges to the higher doorways, and are drawn in, until the unloading is finished; the two barges are pushed out and two more

take their places and, at length, when all are empty, the whole fleet straggles and drifts away again on the ebb.

Going round to the other side of the wharf, you find it looks down on an overcrowded, squalid, South London thoroughfare, and presents as unlovely an aspect to the street as its rear does to the river.

A monstrous, doorless gap yawns in the centre of it; it is littered with straw, and paved with small, square blocks of granite, on which drays and heavy carts lumber intermittently in and out. Passers-by in the noisy street will glance aside at the loaded vehicles with uninterested eyes, little dreaming of the tedious miles of strange country, the days and nights of storm and shine, and leagues of barren sea, by which those ordinary-looking packages have travelled into this busy London, that to the vision of its habitants is so intolerably prosaic though to

the dusky peoples whence these goods come doubtless it is as rose-misted with legendary splendours as any of their cities are to us.

From near beside the wharf stretches the stone bridge that spans the river, and the clerk who sits at his desk behind one of the many windows can glance up at intervals and see all day in motion above its parapet apparently endless processions of human heads going north and coming south, innumerable 'buses, top-heavy with passengers, and hoods and upper parts of miscellaneous vehicles.

All day long, below, he can see the unresting waters swaying and rippling and laughing to the sunlight, or brooding sullenly under clouds; and all day long, beneath sun or cloud, the steamers rush panting to and fro, flinging wavering plumes of smoke from their funnels, and screaming harshly when anything obstructs their paths, and ships and boats

and barges and lighters go gliding up and down incessantly.

Later, when the dusk has darkened on the river, and the clerk has lit the gas, he may peer out and see lights springing up cheerily in the multitude of other windows all along the opposite shore, see the lamps on the bridge kindle to sudden life and stand out crisply against the dull sky; see the traffic and the people still crossing the bridge this way and that, dimly and like shadows of what they were, as if the ghosts of the thousands who had passed over by daylight were all hurrying back to whence they had come now that the day was done and the night fallen. Lights begin to twinkle from masts of ships, from prow and stern of barges clustered at their moorings; steamers flit to and fro in the dark, with lanterns glaring everywhere fore and aft, and all their ports ashine, breathing a hazy flare into their smoky

plumes and scattering fiery diamonds on the wind.

Later yet, and the steamers are stopped, and the river weirdly quiet; the wharf is asleep, with all its windows; its doors are closed and bolted, its cranes asleep under their eaves, and, save for a solitary glimmer here and there, no light remains in any of the windows on the opposite shore. The ghostly traffic on the bridge has thinned out, and almost ceased; now and then a stray cart rumbles drowsily over, or a belated wayfarer crosses homeward, or, having no home, lingers half-way and crouches on the stone bench in one of the recesses, till he is waked by a gruff voice and the glare of a lantern, and the policeman moves him on.

When the tide is at its lowest, a wide strip of black mud is left between the wharf and the river, and barges that have been late unloading are often forlornly

stranded thereon; an oozy, horrible, black slime, loathsome to look upon by day, and shimmering to the moon of nights like the scaly back of some obscene sea-monster wandered in from the outer ocean, and lying furtively in wait for prey; dead bodies of drowned wretches who have escaped despairingly out of life into the peaceful haven of these dark waters are found, maybe, at times, cast up on such a shore.

There are dismal days and nights when vast, thick fogs descend upon the river and muffle it so closely that it gurgles past the foot of the wharf, scarcely visible at all. Clamour of voices, clatter of hoofs and wheels and harness echo faintly from the unseen bridge; hoarse cries of warning and abuse rise from impenetrable deeps of the foul smother, lights glide warily about in it, and phantom steamers loom up and grope their way onward, hooting nervously.

But there are nights when the air is clear and the sky cloudless, and the wharf stands bathed in the white glory of a moon that some few hours before was silvering the mosques and minarets ot Cairo or setting the waste snows sparkling frostily on the bleak steppes of Siberia.

And there are dawns when the earliest flush of day brightens marvellously in the east, and the sun rises, and towers and roofs and chimneys of the yet unawakened city grow strangely clear-cut and distinct upon the crisp, pure air, and the river chuckles past the wharf as if it were still so absorbed in pleasant memories of the grassy banks between which it had been running on its way to town that it is oblivious how the reflections that shadow it are no longer of murmurous overhanging trees, but of rows of gaunt walls and grimy warehouses. Soon a filmy smoke begins to rise from the chimneys, figures

and vehicles appear on the bridge, the joyous morning steadily advances, life comes back into the streets, craft on the river are astir; there are sounds of movement on the wharf, faces appear at the windows, barges are coming up on the flood to it, carts are roaring in and out through the gap on the other side, and the business of the day is in full blast again.

IV

TWO FROM FRANCE

THEY got in at Gower Street Station on the Underground Railway on a November afternoon that was foggy as well as frosty; and as it happened to be the slackest hour of the day they had a compartment to themselves.

They were English, and there were four of them—a large, good-tempered, comfortable, motherly woman, two small girls, and a smaller boy. The boy was so small, in fact, that he had to be lifted in and on to his seat.

It was evident that they had been shopping. Their appearance suggested that they were fresh from some sensa-

tional bazaar, where they had picked up bargains, for the mother carried two heavy parcels, and the elder girl had charge of a lumpy-looking bag.

The parcels probably contained ordinary and comparatively commonplace drapery; but you may take it from me that in the bag there were things worth seeing. Directly they were seated, the two small girls put their heads close together and bent peering into it with such an eager and fearful joy that the very small boy was moved to protest audibly against being excluded from participation in their ecstasy.

"Don't cry, Georgie!" the mother intervened, coaxingly. "What's the matter? What's 'e say, Jane? Why don't you take notice of 'im, one of yer? . . . . Want what, Georgie? I can't hear what yer say, the train meks so much noise."

"It's that doll's feeding-bottle, mo-

ther," remarked Jane, after lending him a sympathetic but impatient ear; "he says can't he have it now?"

"Why, yes. Let 'im have it if it'll keep 'im quiet. Give it 'im, bless 'im!" cried the mother easily. "Play with 'im an' keep 'im good if you can, you two—go on!"

"Let's play fathers and mothers, then," Jane proposed in a flash of inspiration. "Come on, Annie."

They rolled a red shawl for a pillow, and disposed Georgie in a recumbent attitude on the opposite seat, casually informing him that he was supposed to be a baby in a cradle. Then they dipped into the lumpy bag, dredged up the doll's feeding-bottle and started him drawing imaginary nourishment through the tube of it.

He entered gravely into the spirit of this performance, and lay fulfilling his part conscientiously and contentedly,

while they abstracted a doll from the bag and became absorbed in distracting details of its diminutive millinery.

At the next station two other passengers intruded.

They were French; you could not have seen them and doubted that; and they came in with a startling suddenness just as the train was going on again. They came in so suddenly, helped from behind with such gusto by a robust porter, that they nearly tumbled over each other, and the shiny tall hat of one of them was jolted off and rolled on the floor.

He picked it up laughing, giving it an airy, deft turn on his elbow, and they both sat down, out of breath and still rather flurried.

They were a man and a woman; a trim, elegant, dapper little man and woman too. The mother of the children was satisfied in her own mind that they

were husband and wife, for the train was no sooner fairly started than the little woman turned to the man with a proprietorial air and shocked him into instant alertness with an abrupt, imperative inquiry.

What she said the mother of the children did not know, not so much because the train was roaring loudly in the tunnel as because she said it in an alien tongue. But the shrill tone was undeniably one of inquiry; moreover, the man responded at once by probing into each of his waistcoat pockets with a finger and thumb.

He probed indifferently at first.

Then he frowned and became intent on what he was doing.

Becoming more and more uneasy, he fumbled hurriedly through the inside and outside pockets of his coat, and a wild apprehension flashed into his face and stayed there. He stood up, muttering

incoherently, and proceeded to feel with undisguised anxiety in his trousers pockets, in his tail pockets, in all his other pockets all over again, his uncertainty and bewilderment momentarily increasing, till at last, throwing out his hands with a quavering exclamation of despair, he collapsed on his seat, panic stricken.

His companion had been sharply prompting all the while, and now she began to scold him.

She scolded him quite fiercely, his blank and hopeless bewilderment more and more exasperating her; she harrassed him without ceasing, her voice passing rapidly up and down a long and loud gamut of indignant remonstrance and denunciation.

What it was she was saying to him with such vehemence and with such seemingly endless iteration the mother of the children, in her ignorance of the

language, did not know; but he knew well enough, and looked as if he felt to the innermost core of his miserable being that he deserved every fiery word of it.

Once or twice he essayed to speak in self-defence, or to say something that was calculated to soothe her, shrugging his shoulders and extending his palms deprecatingly, as who should say that, after all, it did not really matter so much as all this, it was not worth distressing oneself about, and doubtless he would be able to put things right even if what had been lost could never be found. But she ruthlessly cut him short in each of these overtures, and seeing that his apologetic attempts to temporize merely gave a new and irrational impetus to her tumultuous observations and set her indignant little figure quivering and gesticulating more frantically than ever, he resigned himself to her displeasure and offered no further opposition to the flow of her opinions.

He sat and bore with it all in meek misery, turning now and then a gaze of mute appeal towards the staring and absorbedly interested children and their mother, and now and then permitting his tormented spirit to find ease in a strangled cry of desolation.

His hands were by this straying in and out of his pockets mechanically and, in a spurt of irritation with his apathetic demeanour, the little woman not only stirred him inexorably to an active renewal of his energies, but sat beside him and insisted on helping him in the desperate search.

She pinched and patted the outsides of his pockets while he felt inside; she felt in his pockets herself—as he drew his hand out of them, one after the other, she thrust hers in impatiently, and never for an instant did she leave off chattering and lamenting and fluently reprimanding him.

When her anger and excitement had reached a pitch it seemed impossible they could go beyond, by the merest chance in the world she happened to glance aside and catch sight of the very small boy on the opposite seat, where he was still making belief to lie in a cradle, placidly drawing imaginary nourishment from the doll's feeding-bottle. She caught sight of him, and fell silent instantly.

As she eyed him, the harshness and annoyance faded out of her flushed, pretty features, and left them curiously softened to a faint reminiscent smile, as if seeing him so engaged reminded her of something.

By a touch on his arm and a quick gesture, she bespoke the attention of her unhappy and delinquent husband, and, all in a moment, without another word to him and before he could speak, she was crying as if her heart would break.

Not loudly; she pressed her hands over her face and was shaken with sobbings that were piteously quiet; and with a stifled wail of anguish the worried little Frenchman put his arm round her and kissed her, as if they had been alone in the carriage, and tried to comfort her with imploring murmurs. There were tears in his own eyes too, though whether the sight of Georgie, or of his wife's distress, or his personal sufferings had brought them there, the mother of the children could not decide.

"They're foreigners," she said to herself, with broad British tolerance; "an' I've read that even the men kiss each other, an' they often cry when they're happy."

Meanwhile, the little Frenchwoman was groping blindly for the pocket of her dress, and presently finding it, pulled out her handkerchief.

As she pulled it out, two slips of

yellow pasteboard were jerked out with it and fell on the floor. She saw them, he saw them, and the mother of the children saw them simultaneously; but he was quickest.

He swooped down on them with a half-hysterical shout of triumph, snatched them up, one in each hand, held them before her, tilting his head on one side, shaking it accusingly, and apparently taunting her, with an absurdly extravagant affectation of wrath.

She glanced at the tickets; glanced between them into his eyes, and broke immediately into infectious, irrepressible laughter.

He was laughing with her and at her delightedly, when the train stopped, and stopped him; for this was their station.

Stepping briskly on to the platform, he held the door open ceremoniously and stood waiting to hand her out.

As she rose, however, she looked

round wistfully and hesitated. Her gaze passed from Georgie to the mother of the children; their glances met, and in a flash, by some strange instinct, they understood each other.

She crossed the carriage with an impulsive step, stooped and passionately kissed the very small boy where he lay on the seat there, and was gone in a hurry without looking back again.

"What was that for?" demanded Jane aghast. "She don't know Georgie, mother, does she?"

"I dunno," said the mother of the children, vaguely, rubbing a rough forefinger across her eyes as if the fog were smarting in them. "Y' can't tell. She might ha' done, once upon a time, though she *is* a foreigner!"

V

THE CANAL BRIDGE

IT is a short bridge, and links together two sections of a busy thoroughfare in North London. Tram lines are scored across the centre of it, and trams and 'buses and multifarious carts and carriages jingle and thunder over it incessantly all day.

Leaning against the dingy brick parapet, one looks down into the deep, sinuous trench of the canal and sees its muddy, yellow waters twinkling sluggishly. Thirty yards or so above the bridge the narrow stream is dammed by a lock, and seething little jets of water are for ever straining out through gaps

in the leaky gates. By day, while you lounge and look with the roar of the street in your ears, these escaping jets spout and fall and foam unheard; but when the night gathers and the long street grows quiet, and the lock has dwindled to a formless smudge on the gloom below, they become weirdly audible, and hiss and crackle in the dark unseen.

Hereabouts the canal winds through a poor, densely-populated neighbourhood, and is, for the most part, closely hemmed in and overshadowed by high blind walls and the backs of squalid houses. It has a towing path on one side only, and at frequent intervals, from morning till night, a sturdy horse will round the distant curve of the channel leisurely towing a still invisible barge; and by the horse slouches a thick-set driver, who is either smoking silently, with his hands in his pockets, or perfunctorily cracking a whip

and growling. Half a minute later the barge itself rounds the curve into sight, with its cargo of hay or bricks or boxes or barrels, hooded by a tightly-tied tarpaulin, and in the stern a stolid man who leans against the tiller and sucks ruminatively at a remnant of clay pipe. Near his feet yawns a narrow hatchway, and beside it the zinc chimney of the cabin flutters an attenuated pennon of smoke. As often as not a terrier runs along perilous edges of the boat, sniffing restlessly to and fro, or lies coiled asleep on top of the cargo.

Presently the horse comes to a standstill; the barge drifts into the lock; the gate behind it closes and shuts it in. During a raucous but amicable exchange of views between the bargee and the lock-keeper, the barge slowly sinks betwixt the two gates until all but the upper half of the cargo and the man on board is hidden from the gaze; then the

hither gate opens and the clumsy vessel blunders out, the whip cracks, the horse's hoofs click and grind on the gravel path, the tow-rope jerks dripping up from the water and stretches taut, and the barge, gradually increasing its speed, glides forward and vanishes quietly under the bridge.

There has been no bustle, no haste at all; the whole manœuvre has been carried through methodically and without the faintest glimmering of excitement. A few minutes elapse, then a similar barge, carrying a somewhat similar cargo and a similar dog, and navigated by similar men and a similar horse, crawls into view, is detained a little in the lock's embrace, and goes on as the one before it went; another barge succeeds, and another, and another, all looking so much alike in essential details, and all appearing and vanishing so exactly in the same fashion at exactly the same points, that

from idly doubting whether it really is a different craft every time, one succumbs to a hazy, pleasantly-bewildered sense of the unreality of it, to a feeling that one is asleep and dreaming, and does but behold, on a visionary canal, a nightmare of an impossible barge that is always coming and going, and never gone.

The illusion needs humouring, for it is instantly destroyed when one is sufficiently roused to observe how this same gaping archway that swallows the barges occasionally disgorges one which voyages away up stream instead of down, and that, moreover, every barge bears a different name painted on its sides.

Between the bridge and the lock the towing-path is bordered by the wall of a house which is masked in a gaudy patchwork of illustrated posters; on the opposite bank broods a coal-wharf, its black ground beetling with cliffs and stacks of coal. Carts come down to it from an en-

trance on the street above, and are deliberately loaded by grimy men and driven away; barges, weighed almost to the water-level by mighty freights of coal, drop anchor alongside here, and are unloaded amid hoarse shoutings and the noisy trundlings backwards and forwards of iron trolleys.

There is a diminutive, black, wooden office on the wharf, and one has glimpses through its window of a pale clerk writing at a desk. About noon he may be seen to suspend his labours for some twenty minutes, and apply himself hungrily to a compact newspaper parcel of sandwiches or bread and butter. Now and then sable men, who have been filling sacks and carts, or who have just arrived in barges, or are just going away in them, knock and look in at his door respectfully and hold converse with him; not infrequently he will dash out, with a pen behind his ear, to give mysterious

papers to certain of these men, or receive such papers from them, talking briskly the while, and issuing imperative orders, which they lazily obey.

In the early and latter months of the year he works in his office after nightfall, and, lighting a flame of gas above his head, becomes aggressively visible there amid the pitchy sombreness of his environment; the night makes of his black hut and the coal-stacks one smeary and conglomerate cloud, from the thick of which his window breaks, clear-cut and shining, like a square moon with a man in it.

Except this pallid clerk, everybody and everything coming in contact with the canal seems to be miraculously infected with its sluggishness. Even the ancient lock-keeper is degenerated to a comparatively insensate piece of mechanicism; he pulls his levers and controls his gates without thought or the

need of thought; if he sits in sunny hours at the door of his lodge with a newspaper, he merely snoozes over it till a neglected bargee wakens him with blasphemous protests. He is never seen to hurry; he is as if animated by some internal mechanical contrivance that has grown rusty and works always at the same dead, slow rate, and with great difficulty.

Adventurous urchins, defying the notice to trespassers, descend upon the towing-path to fish for "tiddlers," each with a raw strip of wood, a length of cotton, and a captive worm: they fish thus within a hand's throw of the lock-keeper, and, being seriously disturbed thereby, he insistently deputes uninterested drivers of passing barge-horses to send them away, and they dodge and scutter off discreetly, only to return directly the barge is past. He has not sufficient vital energy to chase them himself, but swears and shakes his fist at them in wrathful impotence, look-

ing round pathetically at intervals for the policeman who never comes.

There are less enterprising boys who swarm up the bridge-wall and sit a-top, calling to each other and pointing down delightedly; but they grow quiet by degrees, and dreamily absorbed in the unvarying panorama for ever unwinding below.

Shabby idlers, young and old, linger to look over the wall, and straightway they are fascinated by the restful, creeping motion of the gloomy waters. They fall into lax and musing attitudes, and seem rooted to the spot by subtle spells, watching the jets monotonously spraying out through crevices in the lock-gates; watching the gates indolently opening and shutting, and the drowsy barges, trailed by sleepy horses, as they come, and pause, and pass.

They watch, unconscious of the flight of time, of the noise and squalor of the

street about them, and are vaguely and vacuously contented, as if that mute, oily, nether stream were a veritable Lethe, and merely to stand and gaze upon it soothed the uneasy heart and brain with a foretaste of the final forgetfulness.

VI

THE HOUSE OF DESOLATION

BEHIND a dreary wilderness of East London dockyards stretches a long, dull level of marshy waste. That end of the waste lying nearest the city is pimpled with unwholesome rubbish-heaps; otherwise its flat monotony of black earth is varied only by patches of blackened grass till you come where, on the side opposite the docks, four high, weather-bitten walls enclose the garden of a grim and ancient mansion.

Above the wall rise branches of stunted trees whose scanty, ill-nourished leaves no springtime ever greens to fullest life; above the trees rises the gaunt, old-world house, hideous gaps in

its roof where the red tiles have fallen away, every visible window of it gashed and smashed and yawning horribly.

A century ago, perhaps, it was the suburban residence of some prosperous city merchant, but nobody has lived in it now within the memory of man. It is reputed to be haunted; it is known to be in Chancery; once upon a time a mysterious trustee used to make spasmodic attempts to sell it, but these never meeting with any success, he appears to have lost all interest in it, and it stands, as if forgotten, slowly rotting away—looking the more utterly abandoned and lonely because it happens to be just within sight and sound of the crowded, living city.

To the rear of it the horizon bristles with masts of ships; past its front gate winds a little-used road; the bare space beyond the road is intersected by a railway, and beyond the railway cluster walls

and roofs and chimneys of the town. To the right of the house, as one faces it, the marshy waste reaches to other fringes of the city, and to the left it spreads to an outlying curve of the docks and a dirty gleam of the river.

Bleak and irredeemably forlorn-looking, the sunniest day can subdue it to no aspect of homely warmth, nor can chilly twilights nor the grey wretchedness of rain add to the sense of blight and desolation that invests it like a wintry atmosphere. Latterly, the great gate has dropped from its rusty hinges and leans against the post to which it is still attached by a padlock, and the way being thus open, stray parties of boys have invaded the grounds and pelted at the windows, scared, doubtless, and thrilled with an awful joy at the weird echoing of their stones and the shattered glass in the empty chambers.

Clangour of iron hammering iron drifts faintly over from the distant docks throughout the day; now and then the monotony of the long, brown road is mitigated by a passing waggon, or by a chance pedestrian going nowhere in particular, apparently, and not in any hurry to get there. Slow trains glide sinuously past on the near railway at regular intervals, spitting out short, sharp jets of steam and leaving great puffs of smoke-clouds trailing upwards in their wake.

After dark, when the clangour from the docks has ceased and the surrounding stillness deepens till every occasional movement of the railway signalling-wires is startlingly audible, you may hear a coming train for more than a minute before, with its two eyes gleaming a-front, it sweeps round into view, and flashes past with a fierce glare raying from its furnace and a dazzle of yel-

low light from its many windows, its rearward eye lessening and lessening gradually into the gloom. Sound and light of it dies away utterly; then of a sudden the signalling wires rustle and creak with news of it to some distant station, and thereafter the scared silence settles down again.

Gazing from one of the carriage windows, flitting by on the line, and seeing the aged house rearing its scarred front aggressively into the daylight, or making a black silhouette against the dismal emptiness of the night, one is awed by the eerie suggestion of mystery that seems to overhang the place like an almost visible shadow. One looks to find such a house associated with traditions of half-forgotten crime—of frantic shrieks heard at midnight, and the furtive flight across the garden, out by the iron gateway and off along the road, of a guilty, hunted figure that

justice was too slow to overtake, and of a dark stain still to be seen within on the decaying boards.

Peering in at the lower windows you may see dusty, spacious rooms with the paper peeling from their damp walls, and hanging in fluttering strips; here, a fireplace choked with ashes of its last fire; there, the naked laths grinning through a ceiling and a litter of white plaster on the floor; nowhere any sign of the lives that lived in these disfurnished rooms and called them "home." Yet at one time fair faces of women must have looked from these windows, and before this barren silence froze upon the place it must have been hallowed by the mirth and sadness of human voices, the throbbing love and hopes of human hearts, the patter of children's feet—at one time, long ago; and this is the place that they knew. Cornices have been stripped away now, and mantels removed; the very

handle and knocker are gone from the outer door; the weedy carriage-drive retains no trace of wheels, nor the cracked and lichened steps any foot-print of the many that must have trodden them.

The fore part of the garden, where in old summers the children of the house may have played, is a mere tangle of rank grasses and spotted dock leaves and loathsome fungi, with here and there a scraggy bush and the outline of what used to be a flower-bed. The larger garden at the back is degenerated to a like condition, and in the centre of what was aforetime a lawn, stands a crumbling stone figure of Apollo, his marred face lifted to the heavens, his lips apart as in song, a fragmentary lyre clasped in his left hand, and the fingers of his right bent as if catching lightly at invisible strings. It was never a good statue, and now, with its pedestal deep sunken sideways in the moist earth, its limbs crum-

bled to attenuation, its features worn and wasted to uncertain lines, it looks but as the ghost of a god haunting a dead paradise.

Seeing it here in the misty glamour of a quiet sunset one is somehow touched with a fancy that haply, when the darkness is come, and no curious stranger loiters in the grounds, and the city twinkling from the distance is asleep, some spirit of the god returns into his dishonoured image, so that suddenly the marred features grow whole again and beautiful, a light of life shining in the uplifted face, and the song that is all day unheard rises audibly from the parted lips, and a music that is as silence to mortal ears bursts wondrously from the lute that all day is but dead stone. And at the sounds—for who knows not the magic of Apollo's singing?—the garden wakens and tembles back through the years and renews its lost youth; some

happiest hour of its forgotten past comes to it, dream-like, and sets flower and leaf budding and blowing along its transfigured walks, and levels the lawn to its old-time verdant smoothness; and from the house floats long-stilled echoes of cheery voices and laughter, and the windows, no longer broken, are ablaze with light.

Then, too soon, comes the white, still angel of the dawn, and at the first low whisper of his approaching wings, house and garden shrivel to reality again; the windows gape darkly, voices and music are hushed, and the god withdrawn. And, by-and-by, travellers along the road without will linger to glance in at the gate, while one of their number tells, maybe, of elusive lights and noises that belated wayfarers, passing in the dead middle of the night, have seen and heard inside the haunted ground; and they will be unanimously incredulous, yet go their ways wondering whether they believe.

VII

THE PENNY PANTOMIME

A DOZEN of us linger outside the shop, making up our minds not to go in.

It is a very ordinary shop, but it is disguised as a theatre. The whole window is screened by a canvas on which some nameless impressionist has depicted a violently-coloured scene out of a proper pantomime. There is a clown in it, with sausages, a red-hot poker, and a double-width smile; there is a pantaloon, too, and a bewilderingly lovely, short-skirted columbine; and leaping from a tailor's window in the background is a sprightly, half-masked harlequin flourishing a wand,

the magic qualities of which are well known to be incalculable.

The gas being alight behind the canvas, its colours glow warmly on the chilly night and touch the squalid Whitechapel neighbourhood with glamorous suggestions of romance. Over the doorway a crude poster shrieks ecstatically:

THE PENNY PANTOMIME!

WIT! LAUGHTER!!

ROLLICKING MERRIMENT!!!

CLOWN: JIMMY GOSLING. PANTALOON: HARRY TODD.

HARLEQUIN AND TWO COLUMBINES!
ADMISSION ONE PENNY.

And in the doorway the showman is shouting himself hoarse and frantic over what may be seen inside for the money.

He reiterates wildly that there isn't another pantomime like it in London, and, irritated by our lack of enthusiasm, he addresses us passionately as "Ladies and Gentlemen," and intimates that, when we have seen it, if we don't agree that it beats everything we ever saw in our lives before—why, then we can call him a liar. Whereupon, considerably impressed, we eye each other seriously, and cannot but feel that no man could possibly say fairer than this.

But most of us lingering outside are persons of tender years and of limited means: blue-nosed, shivering gentlemen of from five to eleven, or equally shivering and blue-nosed ladies of the same ages; and we hesitate, making up our minds not to go in, because a vast variety of joys may be acquired with a penny, but, unfortunately, you can't spend the same penny more than once.

Presently, with a cunning affectation

of carelessness, the showman permits the curtain behind him to swing open a little, so as to tempt us with an alluring glimpse of the interior; and, peering in, we see a rather unadorned place brilliantly illuminated by four naked gas-jets. There are no seats, so the small audience already in waiting stands about patiently gossiping, or smoking, or whiling away the interval by dropping pennies into one or other of the automatic machines ranged round the walls, and witnessing a sensational cricket-match between two leaden players, or the spasmodic tossings of a heavily-rigged yacht on a bumpy, green-paper ocean.

Inside, too, there is music. A wheezy barrel-organ is pouring forth rollicking airs with a melancholy drone. Still, it is music, and the charm of it works upon us. We know the tunes, and can whistle them, or keep time to them, jigging with our frozen heels on the pavement.

And in the very thick of all this excitement, whilst the showman roars frantically and the organ rushes headlong out of one tune into another, as if something inside it has given way and it can't stop —then, though I admit it sounds too much like a fairy tale to be easily believed—the curtain flaps, and there is the clown himself standing beside the showman and letting us look at him for nothing.

He makes a humorous grimace at us and, just to give us a sample of what he can do, strikes a paralytic attitude, squints, and announces, in a queer, quavery, old voice, "Now then! Just a-goin' to begin, ladies an' gentlemen. All as don't come in 'll have to wait outside!"

We laugh at each other delightedly, satisfied that this is no painted imitation, but a real clown, and feeling that it is impossible to resist him; so that directly

he turns to go in, with the organ suddenly bursting into,

O—O—O, the biz—ness!
Things are beginning to hum!

a threadbare gentleman of eight pays his penny desperately, and the rest of us, old and young alike, are drawn irresistibly after him.

Our entrance fills the shop. It is a fairly large shop, the inner half of which is hidden behind a patched, red curtain, and, as soon as the clown disappears round the side of this, it is abruptly jerked back and the pantomime is exposed.

Between ourselves—for it is no use trying to deceive you—the pantomime is not so good as the showman thinks it is. There is no scenery. The row of shops on the canvas in the window is an unwarrantable flight of imagination on the part of the artist; moreover, all the cha-

racters are already on the stage, and can't get off without coming out among the audience. The clown is there, right enough; but the surprising thing is that he is feeble and stiff-jointed with years and rheumatism, and we had cherished a conviction that clowns never grew old.

He is older than the pantaloon, who yet is not young; he has lost several of his teeth, he has no sausages, and his red-hot poker is too obviously a common stick with a dab of paint on the end of it. In the matter of columbines, the promise of the poster is amply fulfilled; there are two, and they are stout, and their united ages must be well over a hundred. But when you come to the harlequin, the poster is entirely misleading, for there is none.

Also, it is disquieting to notice that the *dramatis personæ* go through their performance as joylessly as if they were

automatic figures. The clown distorts his visage, dances woodenly, and plays preposterous tricks on the pantaloon, but his delight in them is a transparent mockery.

The columbines pirouette in the same lifeless, mechanical fashion, pausing occasionally to wipe the perspiration from their stolid countenances with infinitesimal handkerchiefs carried in the folds of their inadequate skirts.

Throughout, since the shop is not licensed as a theatre, neither of them utters a word. The performance could scarcely be quieter or more mechanical if they were all marionettes. The whole thing is unreal past belief: a pantaloon who is really old, a clown who is older, two columbines who are grandmotherly and not beautiful; all of them disappointed and disheartened, with the glory of their lives left out of sight behind them—why, such phenomena are

outrageously impossible, and the unreality of what we are looking at grows on us till we begin to have a hazy suspicion that it is all only a fantastic nightmare, and presently we shall wake and find that we are still in our knickerbocker age, sitting at a real pantomime, and it is we that are tired and have unaccountably fallen asleep, and ourselves and the clown and all the people of the pantomime have merely grown old in our dreams.

Yet nothing wakes us from that nightmare; and the old pantaloon, the old columbines, and the old, old clown continue dancing, grimacing, gesticulating in this weird and ghostly pantomime as they used to play, with gusto and uproarious merriment, in real pantomimes long ago, when they were alive and young. It is very much as if the Wicked Fairy in their last real pantomime had cast a spell upon them, one night in those

far-off years, and so compelled them to go on with the performance, though the play is over, the footlights extinguished, and the scenery mouldered away; and still they must go on with this involuntary mummery, their dresses growing dingy and shabby as they grow older; till at last, perhaps, that harlequin the painter imagined will arrive and wave his magic wand, and either they will all turn youthful and light-footed and light-hearted again instantly, or vanish altogether.

But no harlequin comes, and those of us who are very young watch absorbed, so caught by the glamour of the gaudy costumes and painted faces that we are not conscious of the shabbiness and the weariness of them, or of the dull underlying despondency; and those of us who are old enough to see ghosts do but smile resolutely, because we are sensitive about seeming to slight such pathetically obso-

lete merry-makers, and not, of course, because we are ashamed to have it suspected that we could be foolish enough to cry with anything but laughter.

VIII

SOME CHRISTMAS TRAVELLERS

A THIN mist, that came in with the twilight, is blurring all the streets. High overhead, down the broad main thoroughfares, electric lights begin to kindle without visible agency; while the lamplighter flits through quieter by-ways bearing a wand, at whose touch the sleeping gas lamps waken, as the stars do when the night touches them.

The magic of Christmas is in and over everything; you feel it, a quickening influence in the air; you see and hear something of its potency in almost every sight and sound of the great city.

Shops are lighting up rapidly, and

their dazzling, thronged interiors seem to grow brighter and cheerier and more alive as the night darkens: all of them, even the dimmest and poorest, have enriched their windows with glamorous hints of the season, and most of them are overflowing with an irresistible and bewildering variety of Christmas presents and Christmas fare.

Everywhere bustling, chattering people are hurrying with bags and baskets, empty or full, according to whether they are just setting out to buy things or returning with what they have bought.

Everywhere the pavements glisten with frost, and the kerbs are fringed with narrow drifts of yesterday's snow; horses' hoofs ring out with a sharp-edged clearness from the hard roadways, and the misty air nips with such a harshness that the tram conductor, having lighted his lamps and collected his fares, stamps on his platform at the back, rubs his

hands vigorously, and gives you his word that he shouldn't wonder a bit if it snowed again before morning.

"An' seein' it's Christmas," he adds, heartily, "I dunno that I'd mind so much meself if it did."

There are only two travellers on the roof of the tram: an emancipated clerk and his sweetheart; and as they have the roof to themselves, and it really is most uncommonly cold, he has thoughtfully placed his arm round her—a detail the conductor considerately affected not to notice when he went up just now for his money.

Inside the tram there is a big, genial, white-bearded old gentleman, who has a Christmas tree in a flower-pot standing on the floor between his legs, and hiding nearly everything of him but his face: his pockets bulge with all manner of packages, the contents of which, you know as well as if you could see them,

are to hang on the tree, like preposterous fruit, when he gets it home.

To the left of him sit a youngish father and mother, with a very small boy and a very small girl seated between them; they are going somewhere for tea, and then with somebody else and somebody else's children to the pantomime. They are all four laughing and talking about it unrestrainedly, and the youngish father and mother pretend they don't know that some of the other passengers are looking on and thinking the small girl is remarkably pretty; they pretend they are not a bit proud of her or of the small boy, and whenever they artfully contrive to lead him on to say something good they laugh at each other delightedly, and make believe they haven't the least idea that anybody is listening but themselves.

On the other side of the snowy-haired old gentleman is squeezed a larger family,

comprising a weedy, solemn, good-natured father, a fussy, plump, talkative mother, three irrepressible boys, and a baby. All of them, except the baby, are burdened with bags or parcels, and from their familiar references to Aunt Jane, Uncle Thomas, and a confusing multiplicity of cousins, you gather that they are crossing London on a visit, and won't come back till after Christmas. The parcels are mostly presents, and there is no disguising that one of them contains a Christmas pudding in a basin, for this delicacy has been entrusted to the eldest boy, and during a rash, brief passage of arms with a younger brother, he drops it, and it rolls out of the cloth that covered it and lies exposed on the floor, to the shame and embarrassment of all but the solemn father, who merely wants to know, in the casual tones of one accustomed to such trifles, whether it has cracked the basin.

On the opposite seat lolls a complacent charwoman blamelessly sucking an orange, and radiating a memory of rum. Next to her are two staid City men, homing early from business, who watch the children without seeming to do so, and furtively grin at each other when they hear anything that tickles them; one of them picks up the basin when the eldest boy drops it, and the other helps to wrap it in the cloth again.

Next to them are a wan, shabby-genteel young woman, dressed in black, with a bagful of Christmas marketings in her lap, and, nestling close beside her, a quiet little girl, also in black, nursing an unnaturally woolly donkey and staring across, with a wondering and preoccupied gaze, at the ruddy, jolly, snowy-haired old gentleman as if she more than half suspected that he was really and truly Father Christmas himself, and none other, here on his way to deliver his very

last Christmas tree, at the end of a hard day's work.

And, coming to look at him again, with his beaming smile, his laughing interest in the children to right and left of him, and the large tenderness that softens the laughter in his eyes when he nods now and then to the quiet little girl in black—he is undeniably like Father Christmas, too; and something of the mist has condensed in his great white beard and sparkles there frostily, as if it were a lot of little stars that had got entangled in it as he came through them this evening from nobody knows where, on his way down to the earth.

Suddenly the bell shrills, and the tram stops.

The rumble of the wheels ceasing, the noises of the streets become at once strangely obtrusive; you are aware of the chatter and laughter of passers-by on the pavements; a muffled roaring of

costermongers comes from the market-street a little further on, and mingles with the blithe lilt and ripple of a piano-organ.

But as nobody gets in, the passengers begin to peer about impatiently for the cause of the delay.

As a matter of fact there are three causes, and they are speeding breathlessly up the frowsy side-street, at the end of which the tram is waiting.

They are a stunted boy of about seven, a girl of about the same age and size, and one who is much smaller. Three hatless, grubby urchins, whose general aspect is by no means suggestive of affluence, but, considering the time of year, it is possible that somebody has primed them with unwonted wealth, and they are bent on dissipating it in a tram ride.

The two elder keep up a frantic signalling with their disengaged hands as

they run, and the smaller child, racing between them, is dragged onward at such a pace that, though her short legs work desperately, it looks as though she seldom finds the ground with her feet, but is as near flying as is practicable without wings.

Every passenger rouses to watch their approach with an amused and sympathetic interest, and every eye in the tram turns presently towards the door to see them enter.

But they hesitate at the step, while the boy, breathless and excited, pants an anxious inquiry, which is inaudible to everybody inside and unintelligible to the conductor.

"What?" he shouts, leaning down.

The boy repeats it, and the conductor is taken so much by surprise that he can do no more than ejaculate:

"N—o—o!"

He rings his bell with emphasis, and

the tram rumbles on again. The passengers eye each other questioningly; one of the City men hazards a suggestion that the young rascals had stopped the wrong tram, and it did not go where they wanted to be taken; and everybody cranes to observe the three forlorn, diminutive figures, where they stand in the road gazing wistfully after the car.

The conductor, looking back likewise, seems to repent of his momentary irritation, for by-and-bye he puts his head in at the door grinning shamefacedly.

"Three for a penny!" he protests, in whimsical self-justification; "that's a bit thick, ain't it?"

THE END.

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